

TIME MANAGEMENT

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

Time is nature's greatest "force." Nothing can stop it, nothing can alter it. Unlike the wind, it cannot be felt. Unlike the sun, it cannot be seen. Yet, of all nature's forces, time has the most profound effect on us.

Time remains constant, but our perception of it changes. When we focus on it, it slows down. When we turn our backs on it, it speeds up. Our illusion makes us think it is something tangible. We arrange it, divide it up, and give some to our friends. Sometimes we feel it is precious, at other times we waste it. We give it the power to heal when we say, "Time heals all wounds." It can also kill, as when we live stressful lives because we "never have enough time." On a day-to-day basis, nothing is defined and redefined in our minds as much as time. It's a wonder, we can still recognize it!

Herein lies our power. Because things are as we perceive them, we can choose to see time as a manageable commodity and live our lives according to that assumption. This is one of the secrets of successful people - they work at shaping those things which others think are uncontrollable.

EFFICIENT VS. EFFECTIVE

In discussing time management, some people argue that "What we need to be is more efficient with our time!" Other people claim, "Let's not worry so much about efficiency, let's be more effective!"

Efficiency means doing things right. Effectiveness means doing the right things. Working efficiently is doing things with the least amount of wasted effort. Efficiency gets you from point A to point B via a straight line. Inefficiency goes in circles. Effectiveness means doing the things that yield results.

Many people, when learning about time management, ask the question, "Which should I work on first, efficiency or effectiveness?" In theory and practice, the best answer is to improve your effectiveness first. It's much better to aim your sights at the result than to worry about the process. Too often we get bogged down in the means and lose sight of the end.

ELIMINATING TIME WASTERS

Time wasters come from the people around you as well as from within yourself. Some time wasters are unavoidable, but reducible nonetheless. Identify the most frequent sources of time wasters in your day. As a means of comparison, we've included a list of time wasters. Many researchers find the same handful at the top of their lists, which indicates that they are problems common to all of us:

1. Scheduling less important work before more important work.
2. Starting a job before thinking it through.
3. Leaving jobs before they are completed.
4. Doing things that can be delegated to another person.
5. Doing things that can be delegated to modern equipment.
6. Doing things that actually aren't a part of your real job.
7. Keeping too many, too complicated, or overlapping records.
8. Handling too wide a variety of duties.
9. Failing to build barriers against interruptions.
10. Allowing conferences and discussions to wander.
11. Conducting unnecessary meetings, visits, and/or phone calls.
12. Chasing trivial data after the main facts are in.
13. Socializing at great length between tasks.

SETTING PRIORITIES

When setting your priorities, there are two famous laws to remember. The first is Parkinson's Law. It states that work tends to expand to fill the time allotted for its completion. Parkinson's Law makes setting priorities twice as important. If you don't know what your priorities are, your other work will expand to fill in the extra time. It will take longer for you to accomplish less.

The second law of note is Pareto's Principle. Pareto's Principle, in this situation, states that 80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your efforts. Another way to look at it is that 80 percent of your business comes from 20 percent of your clients.

USING A "TO DO" LIST

A list of "things to do" for each day and week is a valuable aid to managing your time. A "to do" list organizes your thinking and planning onto one form in the least amount of time with the maximum amount of efficiency. Such a list is especially helpful if it coincides with the record keeping you already do for your company. After a short time you will find yourself handling a greater volume of work without increasing your stress. You'll simply become more efficient.

As we mentioned before, Parkinson's Law states that work expands to fill the time allotted for it. Your "to do" list should, therefore, define a specific amount of time (if possible) for each activity. This will keep work from "expanding."

Your activities should be listed in order of priority. Work on high priorities first. In listing the activities, it is helpful to spell out the result as well as the process. Stating when, where, and what you're going to do increases your chances of doing it successfully.

As the day goes by, check off completed activities and make any notes that seem relevant. In the evening, make out a new "to do" list for the next day and

include any activities you couldn't complete the day before. Always save your "to do" lists for future reference and evaluation.

KEEPING RECORDS OF TIME USE

The experts in time management all agree that the more records you keep, the more you will be aware of the opportunities for improving your use of time.

Through systematic record keeping you will learn, among other things, what tasks you're having trouble with. You can actually chart your performance to get a graphic illustration of your strengths and weaknesses.

PROCRASTINATION

"Don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today" (My Mother - ever since I can remember).

Procrastination is like a virus. It creeps up on you slowly, drains you of energy, and is difficult to get rid of if your resistance is low. Procrastination is a close relative of incompetence and a first cousin to inefficiency, which is why their marriage is taboo. These suggestions will help you conquer the virus:

1. Give yourself deadlines. In moderation, pressure motivates. Extreme pressure debilitates. Set appointments, make commitments, write out your goals, and otherwise develop the determination to succeed.
2. Don't duck the difficult problems. Every day we are faced with both difficult and easy tasks. Tackle the difficult ones first so that you can look forward to the easy ones. If you work on the easy ones first, you might expand the time that they take in order to avoid the difficult ones waiting for you.

Many people put off difficult or large tasks because they appear too huge to tackle in a reasonable time frame. They feel that if they start and complete the "large" task at one sitting, it will prevent them from accomplishing any of the other tasks they have to do on that day. The answer to this problem is to break all large or difficult tasks into their smaller subparts. Then, you can do each of the subparts of the larger project over a series of days, if appropriate.

3. Don't let perfectionism paralyze you. This is a problem which many salespeople have when writing proposals. They sit with pad and pen in hand waiting for the "right" words to come out. What they are doing is avoiding the process of writing. Be prolific in your activities. You can always go back later and polish those things you're unhappy with. Better yet, you can delegate the polishing to someone else.

Because humans are so susceptible to procrastination, you must work at building up your immunity to it. Effective action is the best medicine.

HANDLING PAPERWORK

Try to answer any correspondence immediately. After you've read the letter, write your reply on the back and give it to your secretary to type. An even more efficient method is to use a dictation machine or tape recorder. Record your correspondence and leave the rest to your secretary, if you have one.

The other mail you receive should be dealt with in the same way. Act immediately on whatever you can. If you receive a magazine, peruse it and clip out articles you intend to read. Try categorizing your reading material into three groups: articles you must read soon, articles you should read, and articles that would be nice to read. Clipping the article makes it more accessible.

Naturally there will be more than mail accumulating on your desk. Adopt a policy of picking up paperwork only once. This means you should not look at something and put it back down where you found it. It's much wiser to take some form of action on the item. Decide what to do with it and move it along to the next step toward completion.

TELEPHONE CALLS

The telephone is, of course, one of life's greatest time savers. It saves time over writing letters, making trips, and meeting with people. It can also be a great time waster. To avoid spending more time than necessary in calling people back, follow these suggestions:

1. Determine the best time of day for you to return calls.
2. Prepare information in advance when you call back. You can pull files and gather documents which you'll need to answer questions. This is obviously a time saver to you.
3. Curtail the length of your calls, when and where appropriate.
4. Be organized. List the questions or topics you wish to discuss and have them in front of you.

RELAXATION AND STRESS REDUCTION

In our goal-oriented, hyper-motivated, money-making workday we often deny ourselves the much needed periods of relaxation. Like a high-powered sports car, we can be very impressive at high speeds but sacrifice distance, efficiency, and physical integrity in the process. Our bodies and minds are designed to work well if they are not overtaxed. Frequent periods of relaxation and stress reduction are important to the longevity of our bodies and minds.

"The person who doesn't take time for relaxation will be obliged sooner or later to make time for illness." John Wanamaker

All too often the sacred coffee break is abused rather than maximized. People become focused on the process rather than the desired result of the break. A coffee or lunch break should be used as a time to relax so that you are more effective when you return to work. The relaxation you seek during a break should achieve three things:

1. It should provide distraction and get your mind off the job.
2. It should alleviate tension.
3. It should be short enough not to severely interfere with your workday but long enough to provide you with some benefits.

There is no denying the importance of relaxation, despite its appearing "unproductive."

CHANGE YOUR BAD HABITS

"Habit, my friend, is practice long pursued, that at the last becomes the man himself" (Evenus, 5th century B.C.)

Managing your time efficiently and effectively will require some changes in your behavior and thinking. Those changes require practice.

Giant strides, when looked at closely, are made up of many small steps. In "overhauling" your management of time, you, too, need to take small steps. Start today doing those things that will make you a better manager of your time. After you've improved in one area, choose another and so on.

How about taking a moment, right now, to list the ideas you'd like to implement? Review this article and circle or highlight the items of most immediate value to you. Then put them on tomorrow's "to do" list for action. Remember this: If it is not affecting your actions, it is doubtful you believe it.